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SAUDI ARABIA | IN FOCUS

A WEEKLY PUBLICATION OF THE INFORMATION OFFICE OF
THE ROYAL EMBASSY OF SAUDI ARABIA IN WASHINGTON, DC



March 17, 2009

ARAB WORLD

King Abdullah holds Arab reconciliation summit

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz hosted a summit in Riyadh on March 11 that was attended by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Sabah. During the meeting, issues of mutual interest were discussed, with a particular focus on enhancing regional cooperation.

Afterward, the leaders released a statement stressing the importance of Arab unification and welcoming the launch of a "new phase of inter-Arab relations" marked by a "unified Arab approach" towards key issues, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict. During a press briefing on March 15, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal noted that the circle of dialogue will soon be expanded to include more countries.

SAUDI-U.S. RELATIONS

President Obama calls King Abdullah

King Abdullah received a telephone call on March 13 from President Barack Obama. The two leaders reviewed regional and international developments and discussed ways of further improving bilateral relations. On March 15, the King received another message from President Obama, this time delivered by the President's Assistant for Counterterrorism and Homeland Security, John Brennan, during an audience with the King in Riyadh. The audience was also attended by U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom, Ford Fraker.

ENERGY

OPEC announces no new production cuts

Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Ali Al-Naimi led the Saudi delegation to the 152nd Ordinary Ministerial Conference of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Vienna on March 15. The ministers announced that oil production goals will not be reduced in light of the ongoing global financial crisis. Spokesman Omar Ibrahim said OPEC will instead wait and see how previously announced production cuts play out, with plans for further review on May 28.

Petroleum Minister predicts future of clean, abundant fossil fuels

Mr. Al-Naimi declared at the Energy Pact Conference in Geneva that fossil fuels will continue to meet the world's energy needs for decades to come. Furthermore, he

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predicted that technological advances will make them more environmentally friendly.

His Excellency challenged the assertion that fossil fuels are dwindling. He noted that Saudi Arabia's proven reserves are conservatively estimated to last for 80 years.

"While the days of easy oil may be over, the days of oil as a primary fuel source for the people of the world are far from over," he stated.

While stressing the fact that alternative energies are not yet developed enough to replace fossil fuels, Mr. Al-Naimi insisted that they should be included in the energy mix. Touting the cutting edge research being done at Saudi facilities, he declared that Saudi Arabia "aims to be a leader in renewable energy production – specifically as the world's largest exporter of clean electric energy produced from our abundant sunlight."

FOREIGN AID

Gaza relief efforts continue

The Jeddah-based International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) recently extended \$534,292 worth of relief assistance to Palestinians in Gaza, in coordination with the Jordanian Charitable Hashemite Commission and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The aid was delivered aboard 17 trucks and included 220 tons of food and medical supplies.

Meanwhile, the King's Relief Campaign for the Palestinian People has started a new stage of relief distribution. Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz ordered that urgent food supplies be immediately dispatched to Gaza and assistance be provided to Palestinian farmers. The new relief effort will cost an estimated \$4 million and is being coordinated with the UNRWA, the World Food Program and Doctors Without Borders.



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The New York Times

March 22, 2009

Saudis Retool to Root Out Terrorist Risk

By ROBERT F. WORTH

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Near the guard tower outside this country's main counterterrorism training center, some of the concrete barriers are still scarred with shrapnel. They are kept as a reminder: in December 2004, a suicide bomber detonated his car there, in one of a series of deadly attacks by Islamist insurgents that shook this kingdom.

"It was a wake-up call," said the commander of the training center, a tall, wiry officer in fatigues and a black beret who cannot publicly give his name for security reasons. "The situation was bad." A plaque just inside the commander's office bears the names of 57 Saudi officers who died fighting terrorists from 2003 to 2005.

Those deaths forced a decisive shift here. Many Saudis had refused to recognize the country's growing reputation as an incubator of terrorism, even after the international outcry that followed the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Since then, much has changed. When Saudi Arabia released its latest list of wanted terrorism suspects in January, all 85 of them were said to be outside the kingdom.

That fact was a measure of the ambitious counterterrorism program created here in the past few years. The government has cracked down ruthlessly on terrorist cells and financing, rooting out officers with extremist sympathies and building a much larger and more effective network of SWAT teams. Even regular police officers now get a full month of counterterrorism training every year.

"We have killed or captured all the fighters, and the rest have fled to Afghanistan or Yemen," said the commander, in an assessment largely echoed by Western security officials. "All that remains here is some ideological apparatus."

The extent of that ideological apparatus remains uncertain. The list of 85 suspects that was released in January included 11 men who had been freed from the American prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had passed through Saudi Arabia's widely praised rehabilitation

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program for jihadists, and then had fled the country. Two of them broadcast their aim of overthrowing the Saudi royal family in a video released on the Internet by the Yemeni branch of Al Qaeda, in an embarrassing moment for the authorities here.

But the Saudi government, which once seemed unwilling to acknowledge this country's critical role in fostering jihadist violence around the world, has become far more open about the challenges it faces.

"We are still at the beginning, we have a lot to learn," said Turki al-Otayan, the director of the rehabilitation program's psychological committee. Like others involved in the program, he conceded that the return of some of its graduates to terrorism was a blow, but he said he believed that the success rate (14 failures out of 218 graduates) was still impressive.

Mr. Otayan and his colleagues won a partial vindication last month when one of the two graduates who had fled to Yemen later returned to Saudi Arabia and gave himself up. But Mr. Otayan shrugged that off.

"We can't guarantee that he won't go back to Yemen again," he added. "You're dealing with people, not cars."

Saudi officials are also frank about the fact that Al Qaeda still has some popular sympathy here, though far less than before the bloody attacks from 2003 to 2005.

"Changing mind-sets is not easy, and it takes a long time," said Abdul Rahman al-Hadlag, the Interior Ministry's director of ideological security. "We have to monitor mosques and the Internet, because the extremists use these places to recruit people. Sometimes they even use afterschool activities. Sleeper cells exist."

Some of the softer approaches to fighting terrorism, including the rehabilitation program, have been labeled coddling by Western critics. But the Saudi state must provide many former jihadists with jobs and financial assistance, Mr. Hadlag said, because if it does not, others will.

"Sometimes the extremists leave money in envelopes under the door, with 'From your mujahedeen brothers' written on it," Mr. Hadlag said. "We can't let them be the good guys."

The postprison rehabilitation program, which is now being expanded, is only one part of a broader effort to address the issue of violent extremism across Saudi Arabia. It includes dialogues with — or even suppression of — the more extremist clerics. There are also a variety of outreach

programs in areas known to harbor extremists, with the Interior Ministry sending its preferred clerics or sheiks to speak in schools and community centers for two or three weeks at a time. At the same time, the kingdom has completely retooled its prison system, which had been criticized as having inhumane conditions. Five new prisons were built in a matter of months last year — as it happens, by the bin Laden family company — that hold 1,200 to 1,500 prisoners each.

Unlike the old prisons, the new ones allow a maximum of four inmates to a cell, and Islamists are kept separate from common criminals for the first time, minimizing the spread of jihadist ideas, or so the theory goes.

Some internal critics say that the “soft” counterterrorism strategies remain weak, and that the only way to address the roots of jihadist violence is by thoroughly reforming the Saudi educational system, a task that will take decades.

“One major problem is that the sheiks they bring for these programs aren't authoritative,” said Mshari al-Zaydi, a Saudi journalist and political analyst who is himself a former hard-liner, referring to the rehabilitation efforts. “They don't have credibility because they are seen as people who take money from the government.”

In the meantime, Saudi Arabia's main terrorist threat appears to come from Yemen, where a number of Saudi extremists have regrouped in that country's mountainous, tribal hinterland. They have struck there repeatedly in the past year and have declared a goal of using Yemen as a base for attacks against Saudi Arabia. The border with Yemen is long and porous, and militants appear to have no trouble crossing it at will.

For all their success on the military front, Saudi officials seem cautious about declaring a victory against jihadists, especially when unexpected crises like the recent war between Israel and Hamas can create a sudden upwelling of popular anger that fuels extremist sentiment.

“We are victims of terrorism,” said the commander of the Riyadh training center, where 400 commandos sit ready to respond to attacks 24 hours a day. “It's not what the world thinks.”

Muhammad al-Milfy contributed reporting.

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